DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 340 038 CS 213 117

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TITLE A Director of Composition Talks to Students about College Writing Assessment.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 20p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Instructional Materials (For Learner) (051)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College English; Evaluation Methods; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; High School Students; Portfolios (Background Materials); Student Placement; Undergraduate Students; *Writing Evaluation; Writing Skills; *Writing Tests
IDENTIFIERS State University of New York Coll at Brockport

ABSTRACT

Students will be better equipped for college writing if they know how and by what standards their writing will be judged during their undergraduate years. At the college level, measures of writing skills serve the important functions of admission, placement, course equivalency, junior status, exit from courses, or barriers to graduation. Placement testing in writing is the first form of outcomes assessment colleges undertake when students arrive on campus. The State University of New York at Brockport, among many other colleges, has developed criteria that are applied to writing samples to confirm student placement. More and more colleges are looking not only for what students write but how they write it. How well students engage in the writing process can be approximated by building revision into the single essay exam or by evaluating students' work by portfolio. The traditional and most common form of end-of-course evaluation is the single final or exit exam. However, an increasingly popular option for end-of-course student writing evaluation that takes into account the writing process is the portfolio. Many colleges are implementing writing assessment at the upper college level, often using portfolios, to evaluate knowledge of, and thinking skills in, the student's chosen field and to confirm the student's graduation status. In general, writing specialists look for fluency, the quality and quantity of detail, the complexity of ideas, organization, and correctness in students' writing samples. (Three charts presenting scoring criteria and aspects of the writing process are included.) (RS)

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A Director of Composition Talks to Students about College Writing Assessment

To Teachers of English: High school students are often the last to know what's in store for them at college, particularly regarding assessment, now upon colleges and universities nationwide. This prompted me to prepare a talk for students expressly on writing assessment--what it means and how it works. Indeed, students are better equipped for college level writing if they know how and by what standards their writing will be judged during their undergraduate years.

To Students: Tests in school may seem like old hat to you. After all, you have been taking them since first grade. But you may not know that colleges have mounted new programs that can affect you academically: a regular evaluation of your college performance across all subject areas. And, of course, writing is no exception. My name is Alice Brand, and I head up the composition program at the State University of New York College at Brockport. I teach and work with scores of incoming freshmen every year. And I would like to describe testing programs in writing as they will become a reality for those of you heading for college.

You no doubt have taken your share of multiple-choice, short answer tests in high school that have been called writing exams. However, for several years now writing specialists have agreed that, when it comes to testing, nothing gets at writing better than writing itself. This testing calls for evaluating writing samples. First-draft writing to a set topic is closer to the real writing--the kind you are apt to do in college, in graduate school, or on the job--than any multiple-choice question could possibly be. Moreover, a fairly dependable picture of your

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writing skills can be drawn from writing completed in anywhere from 20 (or 30) minutes like the SAT to two hours.

You may be thinking: I've heard all this before. Essay tests have been a main course in my high school diet. But what you may not have heard about are the changes in the scope and method of this testing at college. Educators have given it a fancy name called Outcomes Assessment. The new name means measuring your writing ability after you have studied writing formally. At the college level such measures of writing skill serve important functions: admission, placement, course equivalency, junior status, exit from courses, or barriers to graduation. What this means is that much of what happens academically to you from admission to graduation can actually depend on your writing performance. An effective test will not only be able to certify to your competency as a freshman writer, it can also certify to your writing ability as a transfer student or a rising junior--a second semester sophomore who has completed between 45 and 54 college credits and is entering the junior year and declaring a major. Once into your major these writing tests can confirm your writing skill in that major, and/or as a graduating senior. They may even determine whether or not you graduate.

Placement Testing

Placement testing in writing is the first form of outcomes assessment colleges undertake when you arrive on campus. Because it tells your college how well you have learned to write (presumably) in high school, it helps identify the appropriate college writing course for you. Placement testing also allows for more refined placement once your freshman writing class begins. It is usually conducted during freshman orientation or the first

class session.

For example, in large systems like City University of New York, a freshman writing assessment may consist simply of a 50-minute placement test requiring students to respond to one of several topics. The University of Georgia uses the single essay for placement at three skill levels, as do technical institutes such as the New Jersey Institute of Technology and California Polytechnic Institute. Students entering Cal Poly take a two-part examination consisting of an objective test as well as a placement essay. UCLA's entry level exam includes a reading passage followed by a choice of two questions, one based closely on the text and the other based closely on personal experience. SUNY Geneseo's testing program, on the other hand, works exclusively with less-prepared students. Administered by a Language Skills Center, placement consists of a one-hour essay which screens non-native speakers of English for an ESL course or for the one semester required writing process course. Placement at many community colleges is similar, collecting a writing sample for placement into a course for less-prepared students or a standard one or two course sequence. Along with an exam colleges often factor into a placement decision your high school average and/or the SAT verbal score and the Test of Standard Written English (TSWE). Such a system is currently in place at several SUNY schools, including Brockport.

While criteria will change with the new SAT, if you were admitted to Brockport in the next couple of years, well before you arrived on campus, an initial writing placement would be made on the bases of your SAT verbal, TSWE, New York State English Regents score, and your high school performance. Advanced

Placement English would also be taken into account. The criteria look approximately like this:

Scoring[1] Criteria for Preliminary Placement

Waived from College Composition

AP English	3
AP English (and college credit)	4-5

Eligible to Waive College Composition

SAT Verbal	550+
TSWE	50+
ACT	25+
NYS English Regents	85+
High School Average	85+

Placed into College Composition

SAT Verbal	350-600
TSWE	35-50
ACT	15-25
High School Average	70-80

Placed into Fundamentals of College Composition

SAT Verbal	350-
TSWE	35-
ACT	15-
High School Average	70-

Then a single essay test is administered to all incoming Brockport freshmen to confirm placement in their course or to become eligible to be waived from the lower division writing requirement. Waiver from freshman composition is approved on the basis of a score of 3 or above on the Advanced Placement English exam or successful completion of an equivalent college course or a special program like Syracuse University's Project Advance.

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[1] There is some intended overlap and gaps between scores.

If you were eligible to waive college composition, you would not register for composition until the waiver exam was taken and evaluated. At Brockport the composition office contacts eligible students during their first semester on campus to make arrangements for the exam. The waiver exam itself, usually a persuasive essay, is similar to the exam administered at the end of the college composition course. And this makes sense. It means essentially that you have already acquired the skills that other students need to learn during the semester.

At Brockport we have developed criteria that we apply to your writing sample to confirm your placement. Your teacher can help interpret this chart for you as it is detailed below.

	Waived from Lower Division Writing Requirement	(Required) Upper Division Writing	(Required) College Composition	(Required) Fundamentals of College Composition
Focus/Thesis	Takes firm position; recasts thesis in own language	Clear sense of thesis which may be cast in own language	Clear sense of thesis but uses language of the prompt	Fails to convey a purpose or misconstrues purpose; repeats prompt for thesis; may have conflicting theses;
Pattern of Development (i.e., Argument)	Shows clear sense of argument/ counter argument as dominant pattern; demonstrates sound reasoning process	Demonstrates an understanding of the appropriate mode; sustains reasoning	Demonstrates an understanding of the appropriate mode; fails to sustain reasoning or address counter arguments	Observations are merely associative or consist of primitive listing; reasoning flawed; irrelevant or simplistic evidence
Development	Expresses rhetorical relationships effectively and sustains through examples and details; grapples with sophisticated ideas;	Evidence is marked by substance and specificity but is not abundant	Unsupported generalizations predominate (uses few details or examples); introduces a point and knows it must be supported but cannot sustain support throughout piece	Unsupported summary statements or generalizations predominate; ideas remain inchoate or are repeated; few or no details
Organization	Clear, logical, and artful; connectives are appropriate and varied; achieves effective closure	Clearly organized, with effective support for each point; connectives apparent and appropriate; occasional lapses in coherence; achieves closure	Demonstrates basic understanding of essay organization, with some confusion in coherence and order; correct use of connectives uneven; may rush to conclusion	Logical sense of structure is rudimentary or almost entirely absent; no sequence or illogical sequence; random structure; rambles; incoherent
Style/Tone	Shows an emerging personal style; has language choices to draw from; demonstrates command of vocabulary/idioms	Uses a natural, personal voice; good grasp of vocabulary/ idioms	Mundane; perfunctory; empty	Personal style is not discernible; language is appropriated from prompt or resembles traditional academic prose
Fluency (length)	Varies but adequate	Varies but adequate	Varies but generally adequate	Short
Correctness	Technically accurate; shows mastery of surface features	Consistently under control; an occasional lapse	A few minor mechanical errors	Displays an array of surface features; errors tend to interfere with reader comprehension

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Placement and the Writing Process

Writing a single essay seems easy enough. But what you also may not be aware of is that more and more colleges are looking for not only what you write but how you write it. Over the last two decades interest in your written product has widened to include your writing process. Writing specialists believe that better work is likely produced when you are engaged in an effective process. This means that your writing develops over time: time to draft ideas, receive feedback, revise repeatedly--even scrapping parts of your piece and rewriting others--then editing, and proofreading.

And this in turn has meant a shift in college testing. The thinking goes like this: If you have been taught to compose brief essays on an assigned topic within a specific time limit, then a single test essay is appropriate. If, however, you have been taught a writing process approach--now standard in many high school English programs--a timed, single-session essay test alone is not a valid method for evaluating your writing performance. The problem is simply that what is tested is not what is presumably taught. The single writing sample has come under attack because it captures only the first draft. First drafts are only a start of the writing process. Test essays should reflect the conditions under which you have been instructed. This means first drafts or prewriting, multiple revision, and incubation or rest time--at least in classes that emphasize process (Sanders and Littlefield 152).

How well you engage in the writing process can be approximated by 1.) building revision into the single essay exam or by 2.) evaluating your work by portfolio. Let's take the first option: the single placement essay.

When you write your placement essay as a freshman, you may find some writing process activities incorporated into the exam situation. Some colleges announce their topic (for example, the environment) to freshmen several weeks in advance and invite them to choose the environmental problem they wish to write about. Students are asked to describe the problem and its impact on the environment and then propose a solution. They may draw on a several patterns of development (e.g., description, narration, analysis) to make their point. And they are given time to prepare, that is, prewrite. Students may be given several topics ahead of time. The University of Missouri-St. Louis simulates the revision process under test conditions by allowing less able writers to discuss a topic and prewrite on the first day of the exam. The essays are then collected and returned to them the next day in order to "complete" the written product.

Placement at SUNY Stony Brook is more complicated because it attempts to compress the writing process into freshman orientation. During summer orientation Stony Brook conducts a "regular" English composition class of two hours for all incoming freshmen. Instead of merely completing the usual impromptu essay, students participate in free writing, discussion, draft writing, and peer response groups. Students also write about how they feel about this experience, thus reflecting on the writing process itself. The final draft is completed and used for placement into an ESL course, a standard college composition course, or advanced composition.

End-of-Course Evaluation

You are now taking your college composition course (or courses). What about the other end? Your work must be evaluated. You have always written in school, and that writing has generally

been graded. You are certainly familiar with a final essay exam. And to some extent that is still happening at college. How you wrote at the beginning of a semester can be compared with how well you write after a course of study in writing.

The principal goals of an outcomes assessment in writing is to answer these two questions: Did the writing course actually help you write better? If it did, can that growth be measured? The attempt to measure the gains you made from a particular course may be called value-added assessment (White 193-194). Improved scores between pre- and posttests are expected to show the value a course has had for you. If a writing course has brought about gains, then those gains should be observable, appearing in behaviors that can be measured. Although many improvements in your writing process take place in the mind and are therefore not observable, what changes are inferred from them become the value added to you from your course (White 194).

Below are the goals that the English department faculty recently established for Brockport's college composition course. On the one hand, you may already be familiar with many of these ideas. You may already participate in some of these activities, and they come quite naturally to you. On the other hand, some of these ideas may sound strange to you and some of the words even stranger: rhetorical, coherence, superordinate, and semantic. Do not be alarmed. You are not expected to know all the terms or have mastered the skills. At Brockport you would come to know and practice many of them over one or two semesters. Not only do these objectives guide your instructors, but, at Brockport, you get to know them too because they are placed in your own composition course Study Guide. There is no mystery surrounding these objectives. Instructors share them. So that not only do

you engage in many of these writing activities, but the list gives you the language to talk about them. Notice that these goals incorporate both process and product approaches to writing.

You develop attitudes, skills (writing processes), and written products associated with successful college writing.

The Writing Process

I. To generate topics, information, and ideas, you will use such prewriting techniques as

   A. brainstorming,
   B. clustering,
   C. freewriting,
   D. classical topics, and
   E. journalistic questions.

II. You will produce preliminary drafts both in and out of class in order to

   A. identify a purpose or thesis (e.g., expressive, informational, persuasive) for writing;
   B. generate supporting details by elaborating on ideas identified in prewriting;
   C. discover relationships among them;
   D. develop a working plan; and
   E. propose openings and arrive at conclusions.

III. Responding to peer and instructor's feedback as well as to your readings, you will evaluate and revise your drafts with attention to

   A. detail and arrangement;
   B. word choice or tone and form;
   C. relationships among author, audience, and subject; and
   D. the various rhetorical strategies (e.g., logical, emotional, and ethical appeals).

IV. You will edit and proofread your finished papers by

A. using transitions that reveal the relationships between sentences and between paragraphs;
B. reducing awkward phrasing and vague language;
C. eliminating grammatical errors such as fragments, comma splices, run-ons, misplaced modifiers, faulty parallelism, and lack of agreement; and
D. correcting mistakes in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.

The Written Product

I. You will write several descriptive, explanatory, and persuasive essays. The essays should exhibit

A. clarity, economy, fluency, coherence, relevance, and proportion (it means that the parts of your essay are consistent with their importance so you don't have an introduction that is larger than the body of your paper;
B. a controlling idea or manageable thesis;
C. sufficient concrete and specific details to support general impressions (for descriptions), main ideas (for exposition), and assertions (for arguments);
D. use of the patterns of development (e.g., description, analysis, classification) appropriate to the task;
E. a sequence of superordinate and subordinate ideas that is logical and functional;
F. connectives as well as semantic links between sentences within paragraphs and between paragraphs within essays;
G. effective word choice (e.g., 1. denotation and connotation, and 2. levels of diction--from the casual to the formal) which is consistent and sensitive to readers and purpose;
H. grammatically correct sentences;
I. familiarity with correct usage and idiomatic language; and
J. control over punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.

II. You will practice

A. annotating, summarizing, and paraphrasing the writing of your peers and/or professionals;
B. editing for clarity, and conciseness;
C. proofreading standard American English; and
D. combining sentences.

The traditional and most common form of measuring outcomes in writing is the single final or exit exam. It often looks like a placement test because it is used to measure the value-added from your course. At Chicago State University it is called the English Qualifying Essay Exam, which follows a two-course sequence. Despite highly individualized classes, the University of Southern California, uses a 2-hour uniform final exam consisting of a single question based on a small group of readings. Students receive the topic in advance but not the question, and can discuss the topic with their instructors and fellow students. Brockport does not test skills outcomes as such but provides a two-part final exam as an option for instructors. Some colleges provide a final or exit exam but only for students writing below their expected level.

But an increasingly popular option for judging your writing performance that takes into account the writing process is the portfolio. If you recall I noted two ways in which your writing process can be evaluated: first, by building revision into the essay exam and, second, by evaluating your portfolio. In portfolio assessment several representative pieces written over a given course of study are evaluated. Depending on how the requirements are designed, the portfolio generally brings together several pieces of writing collected at intervals over the semester. The portfolio may even include early drafts. The great advantage of the portfolio approach is that it emphasizes writing that occurs over time--the process--not simply the product.

While placement at SUNY Stony Brook is based on a single essay and conducted during freshmen orientation, it operates one

of the most venerable portfolio programs in the country, having replaced the final exam with the portfolio as an outcome measure in freshmen composition a decade ago. If you were in freshman composition at Stony Brook your instructor would read your essays and only comment on them until midsemester, at which time a first grade would be given. By the end of the semester your portfolio would contain three revised papers plus a piece written in-class which would need to earn at least a C. Many schools have adapted this model for their own needs, including Miami University of Ohio which now even accepts portfolios with admission.

Upper-Division Writing Assessment

And there is still more. The newest and most interesting things happening in writing assessment are happening at the upper college level. This is where assessment acts as a check of your knowledge in your major and as a check against decay in writing skills after your freshman composition requirement is completed (as they say, if you don't use it, you lose it). Such programs apply first to rising-juniors. Junior status is awarded students who have completed 54 credits. You recall that the term, rising-juniors, refers to second-semester sophomores or transfers who have completed between 45 and 54 credits. To become, for example, a junior in Florida's colleges and universities sophomores must pass an academic skills test (CLAST) which among other things, includes a piece of "academic" writing. They are given two topics to choose between and have 50 minutes to write. Sound familiar? The University of Missouri-Kansas City has essentially turned its final or exit exam from freshman composition into a rising-junior exam with opportunities for prewriting. At the upper levels University of Missouri-St. Louis

students are given one week to prepare for a writing exam which may also include peer editing. At other schools this translates into a packet of reading material given students several days before the test, and during it they produce a rough and final draft. At the University of Massachusetts-Boston the upper level writing competency test is based on reading on a single topic before the exam is actually written.

This program applies equally to transfer students. Because statistics show that sometime in your undergraduate career you are likely to leave one college and turn up at another, you may once again be asked to confirm your writing skills. If you were one of those students arriving at Brockport, you would take a writing proficiency exam during summer orientation. If you didn't pass, you would be required to take a freshman writing course or to get help at our Writing Center. If you passed, you would then register for the required advanced writing course in your major.

Once into your major, colleges want to know how well you write in it. You are now a junior or senior. Evaluating your writing performance in the major serves two purposes: it evaluates your knowledge of and thinking skills in the field of your choice, and it confirms graduation status; that is, are you competent enough in writing to graduate. This is where the portfolio may be making its greatest impact, for is it particularly amenable to the various writing styles of specialized fields (writing history is different from writing in psychology, business, and so on).

It is already happening. For example, students at San Diego State University compile portfolios for a number of departments including social work, classics, recreation, and education. At

Alverno College new and transfer students keep an Academic and Career Resource Journal which brings together their performance in various disciplines. In addition, the fields of business and professional communications, education, nursing, biology, chemistry, and psychology use portfolios to evaluate achievement in the major. To evaluate student writing in the disciplines (as well as its general education program), CUNY Lehman College uses portfolios that include three pieces of writing from other fields (but interestingly none from freshmen composition).

You can see how easy it is for portfolios to serve then as a pregraduation check--almost like a passport or visa. At SUNY Geneseo a three-level writing assessment by portfolio is conducted before graduation. Supplemented by an exit exam, portfolios must "pass muster" or be revised until they do. Students at SUNY Fredonia assemble portfolios from entry through the senior year. If you were an English major at SUNY Cortland you would submit a portfolio consisting of two freshmen pieces and three critical papers: a literary analysis, an historical piece, and one other. So far it is a mixed bag. But there is one common thread: colleges are asking students to keep academic folders that bring together their writing performance in various subjects as proof that they are ready to meet the larger world.

What to Remember about This Talk?

As these writing assessment tools are put into place, they become important thresholds for you to cross. Each threshold may involve writing on demand, as in a test, as well as writing more leisurely, as in revising and polishing a term paper. And campuses will actually expect you to do both-- which is both better and worse for you. The one-shot impromptu piece of writing

readies you for an impatient and fairly commonplace world. So standards for your writing are likely to be average. The writing process approach is effective in that it relieves you of the anxiety of trying to find the best things to say on the spot. Your ideas "cook," as writing specialist Peter Elbow says. But, by the same token, the resulting product should be stronger than a piece of writing completed on demand.

Here is a quick and dirty list of what writing specialists look for to determine your writing skill:

1. Fluency or the amount you write,
2. The quality and quantity of detail,
3. The complexity of your ideas,
4. Your organization, and
5. Correctness.

You want to remember that writing is considered the penultimate indication of how well you think? For most of us, there is no short cut to effective thinking on paper. It is you and your words and the labor between both. Thank you.

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